Personalized Learning and Tech Equity Under COVID-19

Thank you to those who joined us for this event, which took place on Tuesday, November 17, 2020. Below, you can read the reporter wrap-up our journalists wrote for you.

Here are takeaways we've distilled from those discussions with you, the Education Week readers.

Taking Stock of Personalized Learning During COVID-19

Moderator: Alyson Klein, Assistant Editor, Education Week

Using the results of a nationally representative survey of educators on personalized learning during the pandemic as a starting point, this discussion will examine the perspectives of teachers, principals, and district leaders on key issues such as teachers' abilities to gauge individual students' academic strengths and weaknesses as well as personal interests, the impact of COVID-19 on one-one-one and small group instruction, how much time teachers are using software as their primary instruction tool, and the effectiveness of professional development for personalized learning.

Guests:

• **Arria Coburn, Principal**, The Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, Mass.

• **Meagan Magrath-Smith**, English Instructional Leadership Specialist, The Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, Mass.

• **Justin Reich**, Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Director of the Teaching Systems Lab, MIT

Key Takeaways:

Technology alone isn't enough of an engagement tool. When widespread virtual learning first kicked off, some educators expected the chance to use tech tools would be enough to entice students to participate in school. It hasn't worked that way. In fact, many students have failed to log-in altogether. Arria Coburn, the principal of The Springfield Renaissance School in Springfield, Mass., said her school has been reaching out to families whose children haven't logged in to find out what the roadblocks are. Is it lack of WiFi? Not feeling like they have a relationship with the teacher? Once the school discovers the problem, officials can seek ways to address it, Coburn said.

Students need to feel seen and heard, especially when they are not physically present. The Springfield Renaissance School does this by making each student part of a "Crew" of 13 or so kids, with one teacher or staff member. It's a space for "social-emotional learning, games, advising and more," said Meagan Magrath-Smith, an English instructional leadership specialist at the school.

Engaging families and communities is essential. Since so many students are learning at home, parents and guardians must become part of the picture in a way they haven't before. Coburn said that she's been trying to engage families through a monthly town hall meeting and parent surveys. But attendance for the meetings has been low, and so has the response rate on the surveys. Parents, she said, want updated information about the school's plans and their child's progress. One teacher said she emails parents each Sunday with a schedule for the week so they know what to expect.

Experiential learning is still possible. One strategy that has proven to be a good student engagement tool: Bring in experts on Zoom. That's one way to give students a hands-on experience in an online setting. Experiential learning also helps to have students continually reflect and take stock of their progress.

Resources:

[Why 'Deep Learning' Is Hard to Do in Remote or Hybrid Schooling](#)

[The Mastery vs. Seat-Time Debate Takes Center Stage Under Remote Learning](#)

Tailored Teaching and Deep Learning: What Should They Look Like?

Moderators: Mark Lieberman, Staff Writer, Education Week

The current prominence of remote and hybrid education, some experts argue, should be an opportunity for more project-based learning, where curiosity drives students to make a product or explore an important question. For older students, COVID-19 opens the doors for deep learning that involves solving a complex problem that might encompass economic, health, and social justice challenges. This discussion will address the steps schools need to take to encourage and improve tailored teaching and deep learning experiences.

Guests:

• **Christopher Andriski,** Assistant Superintendent of Schools, SAU 16, Exeter, N.H**.**

• **Stacy Stewart,** Principal, Belmont-Cragin School, Chicago, Ill.

Key Takeaways:

Transitioning to a new teaching and learning approach won't happen overnight. Some schools have been working on competency-based and personalized learning efforts for years. Getting teachers on board with the concept, and engaged in the practice, is a long-term process, made even more difficult by the challenges wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. "Any innovation is simply a process of planning and revisiting that plan for updates," wrote Christopher Andriski, assistant superintendent of Exeter schools in New Hampshire. "Although we started our competency shift seven years ago, we still have so much work to do."

Personalized learning and culturally responsive teaching go hand in hand. Several educators shared that they've struggled to engage Black students during remote learning because the curriculum lacks material that ties into their personal experiences and backgrounds. Reaching students on an individual level and meeting with their distinct learning needs requires acknowledging their lived experiences, which isn't easy to accomplish within the constraints of an existing curriculum. Reading books in class by authors of color about characters of color can be a start, two teachers suggested.

Too little in education encourages students to be independent thinkers. Giving them agency is the best way to make the learning experience more personalized. Stacy Stewart, principal of

Belmont-Cragin School in Chicago, thinks synchronous opportunities for big- and small-group discussion can be a valuable starting point for teachers who want to encourage creativity and independent thinking among their students. With that foundation successfully established, teachers can move on to one-on-one meetings and unstructured time. One attendee, Aaron S., said he gave students the option for several different projects to demonstrate learning, as well as an option for students to come up with their own project idea. "This encouraged students to go deeper in learning as they had a personal interest in the content they were creating/engaging with," he said.

Deep learning is possible outside the classroom. To one attendee, Melissa C., the term means "adjusting curriculum, instruction, and assessments to align with student needs and student interests." That definition is broad enough to encompass remote learning, which is less than ideal in many ways but does give students an opportunity to focus on their surroundings to generate knowledge. Teachers at Stewart's school are asking students to head out into nature: "Children are doing a study of the trees at a local forest preserve, children are creating artifacts to support their cultural narratives, scaled community maps," she said. Students are enjoying the change of scenery, and each gets something unique out of the experience that can be shared with the rest of the class.

Resources:

[How to Balance In-Person and Remote Instruction](#)

[Personalized Learning: Same Subject. Same Teacher. 3 Different Student Experiences](#)

[Like It or Not, K-12 Schools Are Doing a Digital Leapfrog During COVID-19](#)

[How Personalized Learning Is Weathering Tough Times: 'Iterate and Learn'](#)

[Why 'Deep Learning' Is Hard to Do in Remote or Hybrid Schooling](#)

[What Is Personalized Learning?](#)

Seat-Time Requirements vs. Mastery of Learning: What Have We Learned?

Moderator: Kevin Bushweller, Assistant Managing Editor, Education Week

During the coronavirus school closures in the spring, many states relaxed or waived seat-time requirements because everyone was learning remotely. Some did not replace those relaxed requirements with an emphasis on mastery of content—they simply made academic learning easier. This discussion will examine how the wide range of school models currently in place might shape efforts to emphasize student mastery of content over time spent in a classroom, known as competency-based learning.

Guests:

• **Travis Lape**, Innovative Programs Director, Harrisburg School District, Harrisburg, S.D.

• **Joy Nolan**, Director, Mastery Collaborative, N.Y.C. Department of Education

• **Susan Patrick**, President and CEO, Aurora Institute; Co-Founder, *Competency*Works

Key Takeaways:

It is important for educators and policymakers to understand the definition of competency-based education before they try to use it in K-12 schools. Here is a quick definition from Susan Patrick of the Aurora Institute: "Competency-based education is an approach to teaching and learning that focuses on the mastery of competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) that students must master rather than the amount of time they have spent in class (as measured by credit hours). Competency-based learning, often called mastery-based or proficiency-based learning, bases student advancement on mastery of skills and academic content, rather than age, seat time, or hours on task."

During COVID-19, many educators and policymakers have witnessed the limitations of a K-12 education system based largely on seat-time requirements and all students progressing through content at relatively the same pace. That approach struggles to adjust to meet students' individual academic strengths and weaknesses. Competency-based education advocates argue that, based on the lessons learned in 2020, a new K-12 system should be built around students achieving mastery of content, not on how much time they spend in a physical classroom.

Transitioning to a competency-based system would not be easy, however. Indeed, it would be very difficult. It would require big policy changes at the state level away from so-called seat-time requirements. Teachers, principals, and district leaders would have to go through extensive professional development to understand how to make a competency-based system work. And there would likely be pushback from many parents, who might be confused by how such a system would work. That is why some education experts do not see a huge movement toward competency-based education coming after the pandemic.

Showing how competency-based education is playing out in school districts and states that currently use it will be important, because it will help educators and policymakers understand if it is a good fit for K-12 education. The Aurora Institute, for instance, has a national map showing how states are using competency-based modes of learning. Competency-based

education advocates also recommend encouraging legislators to hold legislative study committees to learn more about the concept.

Resources:

[*The Mastery vs. Seat-Time Debate Takes Center Stage Under Remote Learning*](#)

[*Self-Directed, Personalized Learning Under COVID-19: What Works, What Doesn't*](#)

[*Personalized Learning: Same Subject. Same Teacher. 3 Different Student Experiences*](#)

Getting Technology in the Hands of All Students

Moderator: Christina A. Samuels, Associate Editor, Education Week

During COVID-19, the digital divide has turned into a yawning chasm for far too many students. Educators have long known that a sizable percentage of students have no way to access learning at home, either because they don't have devices, high-speed internet, or both. But those concerns were more easily papered over while students were in school buildings full time. Now that millions of students are learning in all-remote or hybrid environments, there is a sense of urgency to ensure all students have access to Wi-Fi and digital devices. This discussion will examine key steps schools can take to bridge tech equity gaps during COVID-19 and beyond.

Guests:

• **Kimball Sekaquaptewa**, Chief Technology Officer, Santa Fe Indian School

• **Kenneth Thompson**, Chief Information Technology Officer, San Antonio Independent School District

Key Takeaways:

Device access and connectivity have improved: School districts have made a massive shift in providing computing devices and broadband access to many students, often by creating local partnerships with technology companies and internet providers. Districts are in a better position now than they were earlier this year, when states abruptly shut down.

Challenges still remain: Kimball Sekaquaptewa, the chief technology officer for the Santa Fe Indian School, said that internet "hot spots" provide spotty coverage for many of the students in the rural areas that her school serves. And for other students, it may be a challenge to attend online classes when multiple people in a household are trying to use the internet at the same time.

District tech experts should be part of discussions about instruction and equity: "Involve your [information technology] departments in instructional conversations for sure! [The school] made decisions that we support, but we would have advised of [tech] issues they might have encountered if we were in those early conversations," Sekaquaptewa said. And Thompson added: "I was involved in instructional conversations prior to the pandemic, but not at the level that I am now. Not only academics, but I am at the table for conversations in all parts of the organization. I believe the role of technology has changed forever."

Providing the technology is only part of the effort needed to close digital equity gaps: Both guests talked about the necessity of providing adequate professional development and training so that teachers and students can benefit from the devices they've been given. "The devices will come and go," said Sekaquaptewa. "What makes them powerful educational tools is how the people use them. Without the [professional development,] our educational delivery will stagnate."

Resources:

Self-Directed, Personalized Learning Under COVID-19: What Works, What Doesn't

Closing COVID-19 Equity Gaps in Schools

Making Sure Every Child Has Home Internet Access: 8 Steps to Get There

Tech Struggles During COVID-19 Hurting Students' Ability to Learn, Educators Say

Video Series: Why Students Still Can't Access Remote Learning: How Schools Can Help

For more information about the "Closing COVID-19 Equity Gaps in Schools" Education Week special report, read the entire report here.